

2

Some close Reagan aides expressing sharp dissent

WASHINGTON (AP) — Some of President Reagan's most trusted past and present advisers are working in extraordinary fashion to stress their opposition to the secret arms sale to Iran, even as their boss mounts a stout defense of his controversial policy.

Former National Security Adviser Robert C. McFarlane, having admitted Wednesday that "it was a mistake" to sell arms to Iran, added yesterday in a statement issued by his office:

"As a senior adviser to the president, I should have anticipated this potential outcome; the failure to do so represents a serious error in judgment for which I accept full responsibility."

In the statement, Mr. McFarlane said the arms deal was a mistake because of the resulting "turmoil that can have a very damaging effect on the ability of our country to lead."

Mr. McFarlane was a member of the administration when the decision was made to seek a fresh beginning with Iran, but he had left the government by the time he accompanied a plane load of supplies to Tehran. According to The Washington Post, he undertook that mission at the request of Vice Adm. John M. Poindexter, his successor at the National Security Council.

Secretary of State George P. Shultz and Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger both have made known their opposition to the policy.

CIA Director William J. Casey also opposed the arms sale, according to the Post, although the paper said he favored the president's decision to open contact with officials believed to be moderates within the Iranian government.

But there have also been conflicting printed reports of Mr. Casey's position on the policy, as well as on the role of the CIA in the operation.

Mr. Casey has not yet made his feelings known in the manner of ei-

ther Mr. Shultz or Mr. Weinberger, and with the conflicting impressions left in the daily diet of news stories, it may never be possible to determine who opposed the plan or how much they knew as it unfolded.

The effort by several top-level officials to distance themselves from a presidential decision with which they disagreed is not unprecedented in the Reagan administration.

Mr. Shultz once threatened to resign if required to take a polygraph test, and former budget director David A. Stockman frequently let it be known through his aides that he wished the president would accede to a tax increase.

But rarely, if ever, has the president been confronted with such clear opposition from so many quarters of his own administration, to the extent that he addressed the issue in an opening statement at Wednesday night's news conference.

"This undertaking was a matter of considerable debate within administration circles. . . . Several top advisers opposed the sale of even a modest shipment of defensive weapons and spare parts to Iran. Others felt no progress could be made without this sale," he said.

Mr. Shultz was the senior official who aired his disagreement most publicly. In an extraordinary television interview Sunday with CBS, he said Mr. Reagan's decision to ship arms to Iran was a subject for debate. "When you get elected president, that's one of the things you get the right to do, to make decisions of that kind," he said in a scarcely disguised criticism.

The next night, Mr. Shultz made clear to reporters his distress that the operation had been carried out by White House officials, with the State Department excluded. He said a secret operation circumvents the "checks and balances" within the government, as well as its "expertise."

Mr. Weinberger's opposition was made known in detail Wednesday by a source who said the secretary thought the idea of developing new ties with Iran was "absurd," and akin to "inviting [Libyan leader Muammar el] Kaddafi over for a cozy lunch."

In public, Mr. Weinberger said Wednesday that Mr. Reagan's attempt to change the policies of the Iranian government were "well-justi-

fied." But the source who discussed the secretary's opposition to the plan said that Mr. Weinberger was "too loyal" a Cabinet officer to discuss his dissent in public — an obvious attempt to distinguish between Mr. Weinberger's approach and the one taken by Mr. Shultz.

This source added that the Iranian policy was largely the work of Mr. McFarlane. "If you're looking for a culprit in this who led the policy down an alley, it would be" the former national security council adviser, this source said.

But Mr. McFarlane, in the Washington Post interview, said he believed the administration made a "mistake" in selling arms. "I think it was a sensible policy to have a political dialogue with reformist people in Iran," he said. "I think it was a mistake to introduce any element of arms transfers into it."

Meanwhile, Sen. David Durenberger, R-Minn., said a group of the president's friends has been working to help retrieve the situation.

"The president's best friends, a council of wise men, have over the last 10 days been working very hard to deal with the lack of politics [political expertise] in the White House," Mr. Durenberger said.

He said the purpose has been "to see how the decision-making process and the approval of the people of the administration can be maintained."